

Marginal Men of Industry: The Foremen

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The industrial foreman today does not share in the decision-making process which is the core of managerial functions. He is instead a transmittor of decisions which have been made by his superiors, yet the traditional definition of the foreman's position and the current stated norms are based on the assumption that he has decision-making power. The disparity between expectation and experience produces personal conflict and disruption of managerial organization. The size of industrial units seems of less importance in producing this marginal situation than does the concentration of decision-making in top management and the imposition on foremen of rules made jointly by top management and worker unions.

In the voluminous literature on first-line supervision in industry there are two major concepts which have been used repeatedly in sociological writing and in the technical literature of personnel and business administration. The first is that of the supervisor or foreman as the first point in a clear-cut "line of authority" extending from the worker to the highest executive, thus playing the part of the "key men of management," "the firing line in union-management relations, and"the most important link between management and the worker." This concept, variously expressed, rests on the assumption of a unitary system of control and two-way communication; it is at once an ideal and an assumed norm of industrial organization. It minimizes or ignores the impact of managerial specialization and worker unionization.

A second concept, arising from interest in deviations from the normative "line" concept, views the first-line supervisor as "the man in the middle." Emphasis is placed on the fact that first-level management is subject to two sets of demands which are frequently in conflict; the foreman must satisfy both top management and his work force, which is usually organized. The "man in the middle" interpretation is historical in that it stresses the progressive limitations placed on foremen through the growth of managerial specialization and the increasing pressure of worker unions. Supervision is considered as still within the traditional line organization but operating under severe restrictions.

It is the purpose of this paper to reexamine these interpretations and to suggest

an alternative formulation of the position of industrial foremen. Neither concept seems to describe the functions and informal interpretations of supervision which the writer has observed in a number of factories. A few circumstances appear to be of major importance in understanding the role of first-line supervisors; the locus of the decision-making or managerial function; the focal points of union-management and employer-employee relations; the significance of size and complexity in management organization. The last-named has often been used to explain the decline in importance of the foreman in large-scale manufacturing enterprise. Many levels of supervision and the presence of many specialized staff departments restrict the power and authority of the foreman; they also tend to make relationships impersonal and indirect. The converse of this theory would be that foremen in smaller, less formal structures retain their broad powers over shop affairs and therefore are of considerable importance in managerial activity and in worker-management relations.

Unionization of the rank and file is commonly regarded as further limiting the supervisor's freedom of action and as setting up a type of relation between worker and management which parallels, and often conflicts with, the relationship established through the "line." Top management generally takes the position that, in the presence of a union, the foreman is still the primary representative of management, especially with reference to management policy and grievance procedure.

The role of foremen in managerial activity has been the subject of much discussion in recent years. Top management holds that the foreman plays an important part in decision-making, while the Foremen's Association of America states that foremen are mere "representatives of management" and have no power to make decisions. Restated, the question is whether foremen are active participants in managerial decision-making activity or are simply transmitters of these decisions. Here again the size of a given organization has been considered important, on the assumption that, with increased numbers of persons and a lengthened "line" organization, the share of foremen in decisions will be made smaller. Here, too, the converse would seem to be that, the smaller the organization, the greater the degree of integration of supervisors with active management.

Two cases are presented which afford comparison between a formalized plant with staff specialization and a small factory with a minimum of departmentalization. They are representative of many other factories and are not unusual in the degree of management specialization, efficiency, or disorganization, nor are they instances of exaggerated union-management co-operation or conflict. Both cases were observed in their day-to-day operations over several months to ascertain the actual patterns of behavior of supervisors, union officials, and top management.

The first is a plant which is part of a network of factories operated by a single

company. While it had only six hundred employees, it was highly formalized, and staff functions were well developed, so that it possessed the organizational characteristics of larger factories. There were five levels of supervision: general manager, department manager, department superintendent, foreman, and assistant foreman. Operations were highly mechanized, and the flow of materials between departments required good co-ordination. Consequently the work schedules and techniques demanded planning and engineering.

The rank-and-file union had a companywide contract with local supplementary agreements. Daily contact between union and management occurred through the grievance process and through a union-management committee which met every two weeks. Grievances supposedly started with the foreman and passed to higher levels. In practice the foreman usually sent a grievance directly to his department superintendent, since "there is no point in bothering with something you can't do anything about." The foremen did handle requests for information, requisitions for equipment, and some personal matters.

Grievances which required technical or policy statements were passed on by department superintendents to department managers and then to the union-management committee. This body included department managers, the personnel director and occasionally another staff head, and the union stewards and officials. In the committee grievances were settled and plant policies and plans were developed and interpreted. All union representatives had firsthand knowledge of committee decisions and were active participants; no foreman had ever attended, and department superintendents came only rarely.

The foremen entered into hiring and firing only through the reports they made of worker performance; the power lay in the department superintendent and the personnel department. The supervisors kept records on productions and worker assignment and had little other function.

The second example is a small factory of seventy-five employees, run by an owner-manager who personified the functions of management. Rudimentary staff activities were performed by a small clerical force which had no real specialized authority. Supervision below the manager was vested in a shop manager and first-line supervisors. Organization, policies, and communication were less formalized than in the first case, though the line concept was present. The concentration of management functions in one person not only eliminated staff departments but reduced the amount of authority delegated to the line.

The union-management relation was defined in an industry-wide contract written by the international union and a manufacturer's association, with local supplements. Grievances and policy discussions were taken up by stewards and officers of the union

with the owner-manager and occasionally with the shop manager. The supervisors were not included in any negotiations and were considered unimportant by both parties. The workers and their representatives looked on supervisors as either well-meaning people who had no power or as troublemakers who could be “straightened out” by consultation with top management.

The supervisors were limited to training, checking on work flow, reporting operating procedures, and keeping the necessary records. Hiring and firing and disciplinary problems were handled by the shop manager.

Comparing these two cases, it seems that in neither instance did the first-line supervisors enter into decision-making. In the larger factory managerial activity was vested in the higher levels of supervision in combination with the heads of various staff units. In the small factory the concentration of authority in one person led naturally to the exclusion of the supervisors. In both cases the foremen were reduced to the role of transmitter or interpreter to the rank and file. The significance of specialization as an element in reducing the power of supervisors has been fully recognized, but the concentrated authority of the owner-manager in small organizations has not been sufficiently emphasized. This tendency appears to counteract the relative absence of staff controls and is just as effective in relegating supervisors to a non-managerial position. The locus of decision-making lies either in the owner-manager (in the small enterprise) or in a group of higher-level supervisors in the large organizations.

In each case the contribution of the foreman to union-management relations appears to be a passive one. The real issues are settled between union representatives and higher management, and the foreman is expected simply to conform to the joint decisions of these representatives. In both cases, the foreman is subject to pressure from either union or management, but ultimately, when agreement is reached, he must follow the joint decision. Action by an individual foreman, which is rejected by workers is viewed, not as a threat to union-management relations, but as a problem to be settled by joint deliberation of union and management representatives — unless it is taken up to illustrate a general issue. The foreman must be viewed as the recipient of union-management agreement or conflict rather than as a positive contributor to union-management relations. This passivity differs sharply from the traditional assumption that the foreman is an active force in determining this relation.

In both these instances the workers were organized. It is likely that, in cases where the rank and file are not organized, the foreman can play a more important role in employer-employee affairs. In the absence of a union, the relation between worker and management resembles the personnel relation, and the foreman can implement personnel policies with considerable freedom. Under these circumstances first-line supervision can be of great importance in deciding employer-employee relations.

Where unionization has occurred, however, the foreman cannot exert much influence on the bargaining relation, though he may implement some personnel policies. Here he is usually limited by the direct activity of the personnel department.

Since the general pattern of union-management relations, and in many cases the day-to-day differences, are settled by top management without the inclusion of first-line supervisors, it seems that it is entirely erroneous to view the foreman as the “key man” in this relation. He is rather a person who enters secondarily as the implementor of policies which have already been decided, and his success or failure depends on his ability to act on them, instead of on his own positive actions. Any deviation from union-management decisions will bring forth censure from one or both sides, but in no case can the supervisor himself enter into the formulation of the rules under which he works. This activity is vested in the union officials and higher management. The supervisor gets criticism from both management and union, but he is pushed aside when decisions are to be made.

It is also important to note that in larger organizations the decision-making function tends to reside, not in any line supervisor but in a group of persons representing the various specialized functions of management. In many cases this entire group meets when union-management negotiations are to take place. The simple unitary line breaks down and is replaced by a committee type of organization. This same tendency has been noted at the foreman level and was deliberately arranged by Fayol in his famous experiment with “functional foremen.” First-level supervision still in most cases requires the co-ordination of several functions; this is more effectively and efficiently accomplished by one person than by several. However, it is questionable whether the functions which are so correlated are any more important than those which might be delegated to any minor staff employee. In many instances it seems that the lowest line supervisor is of no greater importance than many staff members; in other words, the first level of supervision is no longer a position of special importance.

This discussion suggests that neither the conception of the foreman which insists that he is an integral part of the “line,” nor the suggestive phrase, “the man in the middle,” indicates accurately the nature of the difficulties of his position. The foreman, as is shown in these two instances, is less than a full member of the management line; he shares with those higher up the responsibility for carrying out policies but does not share in the making of them. Furthermore, his position differs from theirs in that those higher up give orders to people who are identified with management, while the essence of the foreman’s job is that he must transmit them to people who are clearly not of management. In short, the position of foreman has some of the characteristics of management positions but lacks other crucial ones. Such marginal positions are common in society, and there is reason to believe that they are especially difficult to

occupy effectively and with peace of mind. With respect to management, the foreman's position is peripheral rather than in the middle. The poor fellow is in the middle, of course, in the sense that a person may be the middle one of three in a bed; he gets it from both sides!

It is characteristic of such marginal positions that the people who occupy them consider that they are special victims of the disparity between social norms and social reality. Foremen express this in the phrase, "They say we are part of management, but they don't treat us that way." The implication is that they feel pressed to live up to the role of members of management, without being given the reward of full participation. This is a common feeling of people in "minority" or "marginal" positions. It presents them with a dilemma which results in a good deal of personal conflict. Sometimes they attempt to solve the conflict, individually or collectively, by defiantly adopting an alternative role; in the case of the foreman, that of the worker who may organize a union for bargaining with management. In at least one instance known to me the presentation to foremen of a training course was an important factor in precipitating the organization of a foremen's union. The course emphasized their importance to and identification with management, thereby sharpening the foremen's consciousness of the cleavage between the expected norm held before them and the realities of their experience.